

Does public service mean “ask what the country can do for you?”

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In seeking to inject a public ethos into people, US President Kennedy famously once said: “ask not what the country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” The idea is to inspire people to selflessly contribute to public service for the good of all. Amidst the current crisis, the point is completely lost in Greece. Instead, politicians, with few notable exceptions, appear to equate public service to their own private gain.

Witness the spat between MP Kyriakos Mitsotakis and many of his colleagues of the conservative New Democracy party. Mr. Mitsotakis announced recently his decision to 1. Give back the parliamentary car; and 2. Forego the monetary bonus for attending committee meetings. Both would save the public purse several thousand euros, fifty thousand for the car and up to one thousand a month for the committee meetings (though the amount is scheduled to be reduced to six hundred a month due to changes in the law). In the grand scheme of things, the savings are insignificant. But the symbolic value is considerable. Under present conditions, these are not only reasonable things to do; they are probably not enough to placate angry and financially impoverished Greeks.

One would think MP's would at least seriously consider doing the same. When they ask retirees to pay more and higher taxes, one would think MPs would have the decency to do the same. When leaders ask for sacrifices, they should be willing to first sacrifice themselves; one leads by example. Instead, Mr. Mitsotakis has been attacked by several of his colleagues as a “populist” and a “spoiled rich kid.” Why give up those perks, the argument goes, when they help MPs do their job? If the money is gone, then parliamentary representation will be limited only to wealthy individuals. Particularly stinging are the personal attacks by his colleagues. Because his father is a former party leader and prime minister, his actions are interpreted by his colleagues as motivated by leadership ambitions, especially since the current party leader was fired by his father in a public spat when the former served as foreign minister in the early 1990s.

Sadly similar issues plague the governing socialists. Mr. Petsalnikos, the current speaker of parliament, recently proposed to reduce the monetary bonus for committee meetings from 250 euros per meeting to 150. Several MPs within his own party were annoyed by the loss of perks arguing they are not responsible for abuses by their predecessors and therefore they should not be subjected to such losses. It is important to note that privileges in parliament are consistently abused, including the monetary bonus. Several MPs have admitted that all they need is to spend a few minutes signing the roster in order to get the committee bonus. Whether they actually attend or contribute to the committee's work is completely irrelevant.

It is hard to understand why MPs think they should maintain their individual perks while everyone else should lose his or hers. It is difficult to fathom how they think they will be able to inspire the Greek people to be subjected to more humiliating and draconian austerity measures when they publicly appear content with business as usual. And business as usual is at the root of the problem.

Their definition of public service is incomprehensible. The key is to understand how funding is linked to public service. Even if one were to accept the argument of having to pay MPs well so that even less well off individuals have an equal chance to serve in parliament, there are still three major objections. First, rewards need to be linked to performance. The idea is that when representatives are widely thought to be corrupt or incompetent, which is the case in Greece today, representation loses its legitimacy regardless of the personal fortunes of these individuals. Second, even if performance were significantly better, present circumstances dictate dramatic cuts in the public

sector, including parliamentary perks.

Third, the symbolic value of giving up perks far outweighs the actual private cost. Greece's political elite are losing legitimacy amidst draconian austerity for many and business as usual for a few. Higher taxes and the accompanying loss of income for Greek citizens are measures without aim or hope unless they are accompanied by a vision of public service. Unless citizens are convinced there is light at the end of the tunnel, a "fair state" as the Prime Minister asserts, the current austerity measures will not work.

A way out of the crisis partly depends on the quality of Greek political leadership. Leadership is all about motivating others to do things they would be reluctant or unwilling to do. Public service is the mechanism transmitting such inspiration from leaders to citizens. As leaders, MPs in government or opposition may only ignore these facts to their country's peril.